



John "Soapy" Waters, commissary bagger, puts groceries in a car.

Photos by SSgt. Steve Ball

Community service

It's in the bag!

By Capt. Patrick Ryder
Public affairs

So many groceries, so little time.

Anyone who's purchased groceries at off-base supermarkets in England knows how harrowing an experience it can be as you try to bag groceries yourself, pay the clerk and get out of the way of the next customer.

Fortunately for shoppers at RAF Lakenheath's commissary, there's a community member at the end of the shopping line ready to make the grocery shopping experience a little bit easier.

They're the more than 130 baggers working at the base commissary. Representing all walks of life and experience, baggers feel they perform a valuable service for shoppers.

"We're here to work (for the customers)," said Vicki Dooley, head commissary bagger. "We're their employees."

"There are one or two exceptions who prefer to bag their own (groceries)," she said. "But everybody else prefers to have someone bag for them. It decreases their waiting time in line. If they had to bag their own groceries, it would take forever."

Bagging also gives back to the community by providing jobs for many base youth.

About 70 percent of the commissary baggers are Lakenheath high school students, according to Dooley. Many keep in touch

even after moving on to a new place.

"Many of the kids still write (to me)," she said. They'll ask about what's happening at the commissary or what old friends are up to. In that sense, the baggers are like a family.

For John "Soapy" Waters, it's exactly that. "I feel like I belong somewhere," said Waters, who's been a bagger at the commissary for 17 years. "I'm a military dependent. My mother was a military dependent. We've never really had homes, so since 1972 (RAF Lakenheath) has been my home."

Technically, baggers aren't employees of the commissary. They work only for customer tips and are bound by an independent contract in return for permission to bag groceries. The head bagger, who's elected each year by the other baggers, oversees the contract and acts as a liaison with commissary management.

"There's a sense of freedom being a bagger," said Waters. "You're not tied to management. You still have to deal with inspections, but it's not the big headache."

Baggers enjoy their jobs for various reasons. For some, it's the flexible hours and for others it's meeting Lakenheath's people. One bagger said he's learned lots from his job.

"From the short time you walk from the store to (someone's) car, you can learn a lot from customers," said Glen Fish, commissary bagger. Subjects he's learned include base events, car races, tourist attractions, and even horse shows in the area.

"If you can get around the 'How are you?', there's a wealth of information (you can learn)," he said.

Lakenheath's commissary baggers are part of the community because they're made up of people from the community, said Waters.

"We're a part of (customers) lives, a part of their community," he said. "We're like the buildings (on base). We're always here to provide a service."



Baggers John Kiegel (left) and Kristin Davis bag groceries at the commissary.